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THE BRITISH ISLES IN NORSE SAGA

The English romances of the Middle Ages give us a striking impression of the Norsemen as picturesque Vikings, sea-kings "who never slept under sooty roof-tree, nor ever drank in hearth-ingle,"¹ often called under the influence of the Charlemagne Romances Saracens, who periodically swooped down on the British Isles for purposes of plunder or conquest. The giant Colbrand fighting with Guy of Warwick represents for us this motive. Sometimes a new note is struck. In Horn we see a young Norse prince, banished by powerful enemies from his Northern home, drifting to the western coast of England to find there after an adventurous career a bride and kingdom. In Havelock we find another Norseman, whose diverse experiences result in the founding upon the eastern coast of England the town of Grimsby. These figures, Colbrand the champion, Horn the adventurer, Havelock and Grim the settlers, fitly represent what was the significance of Norseman to Englishman from the latter part of the eighth to the mid-thirteenth century. With these figures in mind, it has interested me to turn to Norse saga to widen my impression of Norse-British romance relations by seeing in some detail what the British Isles meant to the Norsemen.

First of all, very obviously, the British Isles meant to the Norsemen a coveted object of conquest. I was surprised to find that military expeditions against England had become popular to the extent of being made the subject of vows taken in connection with the customary memorial toast at funeral feasts. Thus, at the funeral feast of King Harald, King Svein, before ascending the high-seat, "drank to his [father's] memory, and made a solemn vow that before the expiration of three years he would lead an expedition to England, and either slay King Ethelred or drive him out of the country. All present at the banquet had then to drink this memorial toast, and for the Wicking chiefs were filled the largest horns with the strongest drink. This toast being over, the next to be drunk was one in memory of Christ, and the third, in memory of Michael. All joined in them, and full horns of the strongest

¹ *Heimskringla*, in The Saga Library, Vols. III-V, trans. by William Morris and Eiríkr Magnússon, London, 1893. Vol. III, p. 51. References hereafter will be to this edition, abbreviated S. L.

drink were served to the Wickings, so that there was great joy in the banqueting-hall."²

The chief significance in Norse saga treatment of this perennial ambition of Norse chieftains springs from the inveterate interest of the Norse mind in the situations created by strife between kindred. Intermarriage between English and Norse gave to the saga-writer frequent opportunity for handling this motive, and the play of his imagination around it has created many striking passages. We see the English monarch Ethelred watching with amused tolerance and tenderness the gallant if impious efforts of his young Norse grandsons to oust him from his throne. Having made it abundantly clear to them that they had attempted the impossible, he expresses his approval of their intrepidity by designating them as heirs to his throne.³ Another interesting kin complication arises from the alleged, of course entirely fictitious, marriage of Knut the Great and Emma of England who is thus made to figure not only as the mother, by Ethelred, of Edward the Confessor, but also, by Knut, of Harald, Hordaknut and Gunnhild.⁴ A certain strained relation between Hordaknut and Edward the Confessor, his half-brother in this Norse story, may be inferred from the existence of a bond of sworn brotherhood between Hordaknut and Magnus of Sweden, whereby each vowed that at his death he would, in default of sons, resign to the other his land and vassals.⁵ At Hordaknut's death his sworn brother, Magnus of Sweden, and his brother by birth, Edward the Confessor, alike claimed the English throne. The saga-man makes the most of this situation, and the simple nobility of Edward's answer to Magnus of Sweden's threatening challenge moves not only the reader, but also Magnus himself, who says slowly, "I think that were meetest and best befallen, to let King Edward have his realm in quiet for me, but to hold this realm which God has made me to own."⁶

² *Saga of King Olaf Tryggwason*, in *The Northern Library*, Vol. I, pp. 109-110, trans. by J. Sephton, London, 1895.

³ *Danish History of Saxo Grammaticus*, Vol. II, pp. 573-574, trans. by Oliver Elton, pub. by Norrœna Society, London, Copenhagen, Stockholm, Berlin, New York, 1905.

⁴ *Heimskringla*, S. L., IV, p. 27.

⁵ *Heimskringla*, S. L., V, pp. 10-11.

⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 51-53.

The most striking of all these Norse-English kin complications, however, is that involving the half-Norse, half-English Harald, Edward the Confessor's successor on the English throne, and his brother Tosti who, backed by the troops of the King of Norway, lands on the coast of England to challenge Harald's claim to the crown. Harald, hearing of his brother's invasion, rides recklessly out to the English camp, accompanied by a group of knights, to make to his brother a final appeal. He is unrecognized by any of the Norsemen save Tosti himself. "Then spake a rider [Harald]: 'Whether is Earl Tosti in the host?' He answereth: 'That is not to laine; here wilt thou find him.' Then spake . . . [the] rider: 'Harald thy brother sendeth thee greeting, and these words withal: that thou shouldst have peace, and all Northumberland; and rather than that thou shouldst not fall in to him, then will he to give thee one-third of all his realm.' Answered the earl: . . . 'Now take I this choice, but what will he bid to King Harald Sigurdson [of Norway] for his toil?' Then said the rider: 'Said hath he somewhat about it, how much he would grant him of England: seven foot's room, to wit, or so much longer as he is higher than other men.' Then said the earl: 'Fare ye now, and tell King Harald [of England] to make ready for battle. Another thing shall be told forsooth among the Northmen, than that Earl Tosti should fare away from King Harald Sigurdson, and into the flock of his unfriends. . . . Nay, rather shall we all take one rede, to die with honour or get England by victory.' Thereupon the knights rode back. Then King Harald Sigurdson spoke to the earl: 'Who was this smooth-spoken man?' Said the earl: 'That was Harald Godwinson.' Then spake King Harald Sigurdson: 'Too long was this hidden from us; they were come so nigh unto our host, that nought would this Harald have known how to tell the death-word of our men.' Then said the earl: 'True is that, lord; such a chief went right unwarily, and well might it have been as thou sayest. That saw I, that he would bid me peace and mickle rule; but that I might be his banesman if I told of him; and I will rather that he be my banesman than I his' ". The emotion that breathes through the restraint of the last words is quite independent of the scruple of honour that prompts Tosti to his course. It responds not to the defenceless position of his enemy or to the magnificence of Harald's offer, but to the brotherliness of Harald's personal appeal. We cannot pass over, as significant of Harald's

gallantry, the words of King Harald Sigurdson to his men, "A little man was this, but stiff he stood in the stirrup."⁷

The efforts of the Norse chieftains towards sovereignty in England did not always, as in the three above-mentioned instances of Ethelred's grandsons, of Magnus and of Tosti, end in failure. They more or less gained complete control over limited districts,⁸ or at least forced for themselves the over lordship of them under English kings.⁹ When in Knut and his sons a Danish dynasty was actually seated for a time upon the English throne, saga shows us England appearing in another light to the Northern chiefs, namely, not as a prize of war but as a looming menace. So far as Knut is concerned, the administration of affairs in the British Isles appears to have been but a detail in his strenuous career. The dream of universal northern dominion was never absent from him, and the Swedish and Norwegian kings were in constant terror of the strong arm threatening them from across the sea.¹⁰

This fear on the part of the Scandinavian kings made England not only a menace, but also a coveted place of refuge for Northern malcontents of all descriptions. Bishop Sigurd, whose activity against King Olaf was remembered bitterly against him when the latter's canonization took place,¹¹ is typical of the multitudes fleeing from Scandinavia to Knut's court. Though preëminently true of England during Knut's reign, the aspect of the British Isles as an asylum for the Northmen was always more or less prominent during the period with which we are dealing. These exiles were of all sorts, from the slightly-sketched, shadowy child, Sigurd Magnússon, fleeing from the gloomy Norse hall and across the sea, trembling at the veiled threat of King Sverri, "The fetches of our foes are now flitting about us"¹², to such carefully drawn figures as that of the brilliant Gunnhild between whose weird captive youth in Finland¹³ and later stormy career in Norway as Gunnhild

⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 159, 161-162, 173-175.

⁸ *Saga of King Olaf Tryggwason*, N. L., I, p. 76.

⁹ *Heimskringla*, III, p. 152.

¹⁰ *Heimskringla*, S. L., IV, pp. 251-257.

¹¹ *Heimskringla*, S. L., IV, pp. 453-454.

¹² *Saga of King Sverri of Norway*, N. L., IV, p. 146.

¹³ *Heimskringla*, S. L., III, pp. 129-130.

King'smother¹⁴ stretched the comparatively peaceful period of exile in England with her husband Eric Bloodaxe,¹⁵ who had forced for himself overlordship of Northumbria.¹⁶

Another aspect of the British Isles to Norse imagination was that of tempting provocation to mere pillage and plunder. These Viking raids were a matter of course, a part of the day's work. The adventurers are amusingly casual in the matter of fact tone in which they speak of these forays. "Where are you minded to harry this summer?" asks Earl Hakon of Sigmund as the spring opens.¹⁷ The account of these expeditions, beginning typically, "Then his son Eywind , taking his father's warships, went a plundering in the British Isles",¹⁸ become at last desperately monotonous. Sometimes these expeditions are dashed with the excitement of mercenary soldiery or romantic love-escapades. As a rule, however, these rovers devoted themselves strictly to the business of collecting booty.

The British Isles, however, were looked upon by the Norsemen not only as objects of lawless plunder, but also as legitimate trade-centres. They "amassed [there] much wealth",¹⁹ we read of Ottar and Anwaldi. These sagas give evidence of the honor in which the early Norse traders were held in the British Isles. Sigurd, for instance, was "held of great account" by David of Scotland,²⁰ and Ottar and Anwaldi received in the Orkneys "much honour from great persons."²¹ From the speech of King Sverri at an assembly in a certain town²² we learn some of the commodities that the Scandinavians looked for from England. "We desire," says Sverri, "to thank the Englishmen who have come here, bringing wheat and honey, flour and cloth. We desire also to thank those who have brought here linen or flax, wax or caldrons." In amusing contrast to the courteous amicability of his feeling

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 197, 202-203, 204, 225-228, 237, 241.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 130.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 152.

¹⁷ *Færinga Saga*, N. L., II, p. 27, Englished by F. York Powell, London, 1896.

¹⁸ *Saga of King Olaf Tryggwason*, N. L., I, p. 170.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 212.

²⁰ *Heimskringla*, S. L., V, p. 337.

²¹ *Saga of King Olaf Tryggwason*, N. L., I, p. 212.

²² *Saga of King Sverri of Norway*, N. L., IV, p. 129.

toward the English we note his dislike of the Germans. They "come here in great numbers, with large ships," we read, "intending to carry away butter and dried fish, of which the exportation much impoverishes the land; and they bring wine instead, which people strive to purchase, both my men, townsmen, and merchants. From that purchase much evil and no good has arisen, for many have lost their life through it, and some their limbs. . . . Overdrinking is the cause. To those Southmen I feel much ill-will for their voyage here."²³ This dislike and contempt for the Germans comes out again and again in Northern story. Speaking of the deterioration of young Ingild Saxo says, "For when he had once abandoned himself to the manners of Teuton-land, he did not blush to yield to its unmanly wantonness. No slight incentives to debauchery have flowed down our country's throat from that sink of a land. Hence came magnificent dishes, sumptuous kitchens, the base service of cooks, and all sorts of abominable sausages. Hence came our adoption, wandering from the ways of our fathers, of a more dissolute dress."²⁴ And again, "Swedes and Norwegians should therefore consider how far the multitudes of the North had always surpassed the Germans and the Slavs. They should therefore despise an army which seemed to be composed more of a mass of fickle offscourings than of a firm and stout soldiery."²⁵ It has seemed worth while to dwell on this point because it throws into strong relief the Norse attitude toward the men of the British Isles. Though they constantly conquer them, there is never, in Norse romance, a trace of contempt for the Western men. They evidently liked and respected them. They never failed, however, to fling scorn at the Southmen.

These accounts of chaffering voyages between England and Scandinavia, such as gave rise to King Sverri's speech, form pleasant interludes between periods of perennial plunder and conquest. As in Chaucer's time, these merchants are the newsmen and gossips of the day, bearing from one country to another tidings gay or grave. From these chapmen Norway learns all that was ever known of the fate of Earl Hakon (ruler under Knut of conquered Norway) and his English bride; namely, that his ship "was

²³ *Ibid.*, pp. 129-130.

²⁴ *Danish History of Saxo Grammaticus*, II, pp. 392-393.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 478.

seen north off Caithness one day at eve in a great storm, and the wind blowing out into the Pentland firth. And those who will follow this tale, say that the ship must have been driven into the whirl That same autumn chapmen told there that tidings went about England, how that men deemed the earl would be lost; anyhow all folk knew that that autumn he came not to Norway."²⁶

The British Isles also served Scandinavia as fostermother of future Norse kings. These fosterlings were of two types: first, royal children formally entrusted to England for nurture; second, deserted illegitimate sons of royal wandering Don Juans. The most interesting example of the first type is Hakon, foster-son of King Athelstan.²⁷ The presence of this Norse boy in the English court is charmingly handled. "He was taller than other men, stronger, and handsomer; much skilled in manly exercises, wise, eloquent, and [became] a good Christian."²⁸ Athelstan learned to love him "more than he loved any other person, whether his own relative or not."²⁹ In sharp contrast to this carefully nurtured Northern prince we see the wild Irish boy Harald Gilli, "tall and slender of build, long-necked, somewhat long-faced, black-eyed, dark of hair,"³⁰ whose only accomplishment was the swiftness of foot by which he could outrun the fleetest horse,³¹ standing before King Sigurd of Norway,³² clad in his Irish raiment, his tongue stumbling over the "stiff"³³ North words by which he claimed sonship to King Magnus Barefoot, who appears to have had a sweetheart in every port. This future Norse king, also, the Western Island has fostered, but untenderly in an obscure corner in the care of a deserted Irish girl.³⁴ He walked over nine glowing plowshares to prove the truth of his statements,³⁵ and ultimately ascended the throne.³⁶

²⁶ *Heimskringla*, S. L., IV, pp. 376-377.

²⁷ *Saga of King Olaf Tryggwason*, N. L., I, pp. 10-12.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ *Heimskringla*, S. L., V, p. 297.

³¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 297-299.

³² *Ibid.*, pp. 295-6.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 297.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 295.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 296.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 313-314, 324.

In another aspect the British Isles were important also from the Norse point of view. It was land from which stately brides might be imported to be wives and mothers of Norse kings, as in the case of Ella's daughter, Blœia, married to Sigurd.³⁷ As a rule, the saga-man's imagination lapses when dealing with these marriages of state. It takes fire constantly, however, at the various love adventures befalling Norse rovers and freebooters. And it is interesting to find the Irish princess easily the dominant figure in this connection. The famous Iseult was, if we may trust Norse saga, only one of a great sisterhood of love-compelling ladies of kindred blood. There are many of these princesses, wooed and married, or wooed and deserted, as the case may be, by these adventurers from the North. The prettiest of these stories is that of Gyda, sister of the King of Dublin, who, ruling in an English district in her dead husband's stead, has called together an assembly of the chief men of the district from which to choose, from motives of expediency, her second spouse. All the native chieftains are there gorgeously attired; and thither "also was come Olaf, clad in his wet-weather gear, and a shag-cloak over all, and he stood with his company outward from other folk." And Gyda, the fair and young and greatly desired, went royally and fearlessly, we read, "here and there looking at everyone who seemed to her of the mould of a man; but when she came whereas Olaf stood, and looked up into the face of him, she asked what man he was. He named himself Oli: 'I am an outland man here,' said he. Gyda said: 'Wilt thou have me? then I will choose thee. . . . Gyda am I called,' said she, 'a king's daughter of Ireland, but I was wedded here in the land to an earl who had dominion here. But now since he is dead have I ruled the realm, and men have wooed me; neither have I seen any to whom I list to be wedded.' She was a young woman, and full fair So now Olaf betrothed him to Gyda."³⁸ Such is one story of the perennial Irish princess. Sometimes, as in the case of Raftort, their husbands remain with them in the British Isles.³⁹ Sometimes, like Gyda and Melkorka,⁴⁰ they return with their husbands to Scandi-

³⁷ *Saga of King Olaf Tryggwason*, N. L., I, p. 78.

³⁸ *Heimskringla*, S. L., III, pp. 264-265.

³⁹ *Saga of King Olaf Tryggwason*, N. L., I, p. 170.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 169

navia. Sometimes they are deserted, like any peasant girl, by their light-of-love wooers. King Sigurd Jerusalem-Farer, for instance, "left behind west beyond the sea the daughter of the Irish king,"⁴¹ later marrying Malmfrid of Norway.⁴²

We have also in Norse saga picturesque reflection of the fact that to the Norsemen the British Isles meant a source not only of material commodities by trade or plunder, but also of men. Some of these Englishmen occupied high positions in Scandinavian armies and councils. Skuli, for instance, "a wise man, and of mickle stir, and the goodliest of men to look upon", became captain of the king's bodyguard and spoke at Things, "and ruled with the king in all land-ruling."⁴³ The struggling church drew also from England clergymen of both high and low ecclesiastical rank such as Reinald, Bishop of Stavanger, and Richard, a parish priest of the Uplands.⁴⁴ Scandinavia drew from England, also, solid and permanent settlers, such as Ketil Crook, "of high kin of England," for whom King Olaf "gat . . . a good wedding," and from whom "is come a many great folk."⁴⁵

Fighting men in great numbers appear to have come from the British Isles to serve in the Northern armies or to range with the Vikings on their plunder expeditions. In the former class, that of the mercenary soldiers, Wales seems well represented. We see Giffard the Welshman gaining an unenviable reputation by putting in appearance just too late for the fight at Foxern. The scald sings tauntingly,

"The king asked what was doing
Giffard, whenas the folk fought;
In gore we reddened weapons,
But thither came he nowhere.
On a red nag the dastard
Full-loth was to forth-riding;
And nought will he our flock fill,
The false knight of the Welshmen."⁴⁶

Over against this dubious picture we may place the gallant Welshman Biorn the Bretlander, as he is called, who, among other adven-

⁴¹ *Heimskringla*, S. L., V, p. 247.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 324, 381.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 270.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 183.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 183.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 229.

tures, was present at that strange battle in the North where hail-stones flew under a heavy sky which, clearing, revealed to "the Wickings' fancy" a gigantic superwoman on Earl Hakon's ship, "every one of whose fingers seemed to shoot forth arrows in swift succession, . . . every arrow . . . weighted with death to some one."⁴⁷ The most singular soldiers coming from England, however, are those warriors called Ribbalds whom King John sends as a present to King Sverri⁴⁸ and who seem to have far outdone, along their own line, the Berserkerk themselves. Of these latter we read, "[Odin's] men went without byrnie, and were mad as dogs or wolves, and bit on their shields, and were as strong as bears or bulls; menfolk they slew, and neither fire nor steel would deal with them: and this is what is called Bareserks-gang."⁴⁹ A Ribbald-gang was apparently far more sinister. The Berserkerk at least fought in the open and devoted themselves to men. But the Ribbalds the amazed saga-man describes as "swift of foot as deer, excellent bowmen, very brave, and did not shrink from evil deeds Wherever they came they slew everyone, young and old, women as well as men. They killed all the cattle they could, and even dogs and cats and every living thing in their way; they burned, too, all the homesteads they came near. But if people gathered to encounter them, they fled to the fells and inaccessible places, and ever appeared where no one expected them. They plundered homesteads which no hostile force had ever before visited, and committed outrages the like of which no man knew."⁵⁰ I know of no picture equal to this for blood-frenzy, save that, in the *Iliad*, of Achilles raging under wooded Placus, where, according to one interpretation of a doubtful passage, he kills not only the father and brother of Andromache, but even "the trailing-footed kine and snowy sheep."⁵¹

Of the adventurers from the British Isles accompanying the Vikings on their voyages, we have a memorial of one in the name of Faxi-os applied in his honor to a broad estuary of Iceland opening into the sea.⁵² The saga says that this party named Iceland,

⁴⁷ *Saga of King Olaf Tryggwason*, N. L., I, pp. 122, 118-119.

⁴⁸ *Saga of King Sverri of Norway*, N. L., IV, p. 224.

⁴⁹ *Heimskringla*, S. L., III, pp. 17-18.

⁵⁰ *Saga of King Sverri of Norway*, N. L., IV, pp. 224-225.

⁵¹ *Iliad*, VI, ll. 423-425.

⁵² *Saga of King Olaf Tryggwason*, N. L., I, p. 160.

and played an important part in luring settlers there by speaking of it as a land so fertile "that butter dropped from every blade of grass."⁵³ Another type of man that the Norsemen drew from the British Isles was the wretched thrall, the prize of plunder or purchase. Of these men a memorial remains in the name of a group of islands in sight of Iceland, Westmaneyes (West Man Islands), so called because ten of these captured slaves, mutinying, were there cut down by their angry master.⁵⁴ As the purchased property of Thangbrand, one of our ubiquitous Irish beauties sailed off to Scandinavia where, of course, great chiefs fought to the death for the sake of her loveliness.⁵⁵

Possibly the British Isles appear most interestingly in Norse saga as a source of Christian influence. The channel through which this influence most strikingly asserts itself is the kingship of men like Hakon, before mentioned as Athelstan's fosterling, and Olaf Tryggwason. I shall use the career of these two men as illustrations of the fashion in which the Christianity emanating from the British Isles made itself felt in Scandinavia.

We have seen that Hakon was converted from Paganism during the years of his training at the English court. Olaf's conversion was accomplished in another fashion.⁵⁶ A shield bearing upon it the figure of the Holy Cross with the figure of our Lord, which had been presented to a Norse scholar, Thangbrand, by the Archbishop of Canterbury, attracted Olaf's attention. " 'Who is the person in agony on the Cross,' he said, 'whom you Christians magnify?' ' 'Tis Our Lord Jesus Christ whom we magnify,' answered Thangbrand. 'What evil did He,' asked the king 'that He thus suffered on the Cross?' Thereupon Thangbrand expounded to him minutely the passion of our Lord, and the wonders of the Cross." The story made a great impression upon Olaf and he received with delight the shield that Thangbrand bestowed upon him.⁵⁷ The sign of the cross became to him a magic talisman whereby he worked wonders for himself and his followers. They found themselves, for instance, pursued by their enemies and in

⁵³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 162-163.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 102.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 91-100.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 91-92.

great peril, "for the forest near them was thick and dwarf, and was no safe hiding-place. Then King Olaf, having great confidence in the mercy of God, spoke thus to his men: 'I know,' said he, 'that there is a mighty God who rules over Heaven and has created all things. To Him belongs, as I have also heard, a victorious token of great power; the sign of the Cross on which He suffered. Let us all now humbly pray to that God of Heaven to shelter us with the sign of His Cross. Let us lie down on the ground, and taking two twigs, place them upon us in the figure of 'a cross.' As he bade them, so they all did. Their foes came towards them with a great din and clashing of arms, expecting to capture them readily, having just before seen them but a short distance off. But losing sight of them, the pursuers rushed in all directions through the wood, and failed to find them, though they lay at their feet. Thus the Holy Cross saved them by God's help, and the pursuers gave up the search."⁵⁸ The incipient faith thus dawning in Olaf was nourished by conventional visions of heaven and hell.⁵⁹ He then started with his men on a marauding expedition to the British Isles, where chance brought him into contact with religious hermits⁶⁰ and prophets, who hailed with delight this opportunity of confirming in the faith so promising a convert. It was in the Scilly Islands that his baptism was accomplished under impressive circumstances.⁶¹ His marriage to his Christian wife Gyda, and years of sojourning alternately in England and Ireland, fully confirmed his faith and prepared him for his evangelizing career in Scandinavia.

Such were the contrasting fashions in which Hakon and Olaf, the two kings most significant in Norse saga so far as the propagation of Christianity is concerned, were converted. Hakon, Athelstan's fosterling, is represented as the introducer of Christianity into Scandinavia,⁶² Olaf Tryggwason as its most ardent propagator.⁶³ Both, as we have seen, obtained their Christianity directly from the British Isles. It may be interesting to notice two points

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 92-93.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 100.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 93-94.

⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 22.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 98-99.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, pp. 190-191.

in this connection: first, the simplicity of the creed which Hakon brought from England; second, the fate of this Britain-derived faith in the hands of these early propagators.

We read that when Hakon came back from England the whole land was heathen,⁶⁴ human sacrifice being common.⁶⁵ The introduction of the new creed gave rise at once to a perennial struggle between Christ and Thor. Missionaries of the new religion were long met by such taunts as, "Hast thou heard . . . how Thor challenged Christ to single combat, and how he did not dare to fight with Thor?"⁶⁶ Or a woman would say: "Knowest thou . . . who it was that shattered thy ship?" "What has thou to say about that?" Thangbrand would retort, "Whereupon she would sing,

"He that giant's offspring . . . slayeth
Broke the mew-field's bison stout . . .
Thus the Gods, bell's warder . . . grieving,
Crushed the falcon of the strand . . .
To the courser of the causeway . . .
Little good was Christ I ween,
When Thor shattered ships to pieces."⁶⁷

Against this belligerent paganism we read that Hakon proceeded with the utmost caution, confining his efforts at first to his most intimate friends, and daring only to change the dates of the feast of Yule so that they coincided with the Christian Christmas.⁶⁸ Having ventured finally to summon an assembly of yeomen at Frosta he says, "I make my request and prayer to all you yeomen . . . high and low; and besides you, to all the people, young and old, rich and poor, women as well as men, that you will all submit to be christened, and believe in one God, Christ the son of Mary; that you will forsake all sacrifices and heathen gods; that you will keep holy every seventh day, and rest from labour; and that you will fast every seventh day."⁶⁹ Such was the creed proposed by Hakon. It was greeted with uproar among the yeomen, the clause that caused displeasure being that which required rest on

⁶⁴ *Saga of King Olaf Tryggwason*, N. L., I, p. 22.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶⁶ *Story of Burnt Nial*, p. 143, trans. by Sir George Webbe Dasent, pub. by Norreña Society, London, Stockholm, Copenhagen, Berlin, New York, 1906.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

⁶⁸ *Saga of King Olaf Tryggwason*, N. L., I, p. 22.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 23.

the seventh day. They complained of it as an effort to restrict labour and therefore bread.⁷⁰ Many tense situations followed. At the sacrificial banquet at harvest time, for instance, King Hakon, when the horn was filled, made over it the sign of the cross. The suspicious yeomen demanded explanation, whereupon the quick-witted Earl Sigurd, who had scrupulously hallowed his toast to Odin, came to the rescue explaining, "The King hallows his toasts to Thor; before drinking from the cup, he made the sign of the Hammer over it."⁷¹ The earl's troubles were by no means over, however, for the yeomen again became angry when the King refused to eat horse flesh or horse broth. This time the earl poured oil upon the troubled waters by persuading the king to let the vapor from the steaming kettle enter his mouth. ". . . . but," we read, "neither he nor the yeomen were well pleased."⁷²

The caution and gentleness with which Athelstan's fosterling proceeded were not productive of many results so far as propagation of the new religion was concerned. A far more effective course was pursued by Olaf Tryggwason, who had the satisfaction of seeing people hasten with all convenient speed to the baptismal font. His usual course of procedure may be illustrated by his dealing with Earl Sigurd Lodwerson, whom he had conquered. ". . . . 'there are two courses open to you,' he said. 'The one, that you accept the true faith, and allow yourself to be baptized with all your subjects. You may thus expect to hold under me the kingdom which you have hitherto held; and, moreover, which is of much greater importance, you may hope to reign with Almighty God forever in the glory of the Kingdom of Heaven. . . . The other, a very wretched course, and unlike the former, that you now die; and after your death I will pass over the Islands with fire and flame, laying waste the whole realm, unless the folk will believe in the true God. If this is the course you accept, you will, after a speedy death, like others who trust in carved images, suffer terrible torments with the Fiend in the fire of hell forever.' In this emergency the earl chose the meeter course and accepted the true faith."⁷³

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, p. 25.

⁷² *Ibid.*

⁷³ *Ibid.*, p. 136.

While the kings were the most conspicuous channels for disseminating the religion derived from England, they were doubtless greatly assisted in their work by English clergymen such as Bishop Reinald and Richard the priest above referred to. Both fell victims to the sort of restless suspicion peculiarly likely to attach itself to priests of foreign faith and blood; in the case of both the wave of popular sympathy induced by their tragic fates doubtless contributed largely to the effectiveness of the propaganda in which they were engaged. Bishop Reinald, a dear friend and adherent of the fallen King Magnus, was suspected by the conqueror, Harald, of having been entrusted with much of Magnus' gold. Harald demanded it, but Reinald, steadfastly denying the charge, offered to prove his truth by submission to The Ordeal. Harald would not allow this, and the Bishop, resolutely refusing to impoverish the see by paying the great sum of money brutally demanded by the king, was hanged "out on Holm on the slaughter-sling. And when he walked up to the gallows, he shook the boot from his foot, and said and swore withal: 'I know of no more of King Magnus' wealth than what is in this boot.' And in it was a gold ring." The self-restraint of the saga-man is evident in the simple words, ". . . . and this deed was much blamed."⁷⁴ He lets us feel the popular heart throbbing with indignation. Beyond that no personal comment obscures for us the poignant suggestiveness of the lines. The poor priest Richard had, ultimately, a happier fate, in that his innocence of the crime charged to him was proved by miracle. About his pastoral relations with a woman of his parish there "fared and flew a fearful word" as a result of which he was unspeakably tortured by the relatives of the woman. He lay thus for some time in piteous plight, from which he was at length rescued by the glorified spirit of the redoubtable King Olaf Tryggwason above-mentioned, who had died in the odour of sanctity. His methods remained strenuous; for whereas other heavenly ministrants healed saints' wounds by application of balm and roses, the "dearling King Olaf" applied his ghostly hands to Richard in a vigorous physical manipulation, uncomfortable but highly effective. The priest instantly became whole again, bearing only enough marks of his martyrdom to emphasize in the eyes of men his wondrous healing.⁷⁵

⁷⁴ *Heimskringla*, S. L., V, p. 324.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 381-385.

Besides kings and clergymen engaged in active propaganda we find many other men who, having sojourned in the British Isles for plunder or conquest or fostering, returned home to spread abroad, more casually, knowledge of the new religion to which they had been converted. Such was the volatile Helgi the Lean whose belief, as the writer remarks reflectively, "was a very mixed one; for though he was baptized, and declared his belief in Christ, he made vows to Thor whenever he was engaged in seafaring, or any matters that required hardihood."⁷⁶ A more stable influence than Helgi's was that of Orlyg, foster-son of Bishop Patrick, who, returning to Iceland after his fostering in the British Isles, founded a family remarkable for its piety and its efforts to establish the adopted faith. Their extreme punctilio in all matters pertaining to religion is evidenced by the following remarkable story. His great-grandson Halldor saw in a vision St. Asolf, a man bright and glorious, who thus spoke to him. "I wish to inform you, Halldor, that I am not pleased with your housemaid, who always wipes her feet upon my tomb when she comes from the milking shed. I tell you this, because you are intending to have a church built at your homestead, and I desire that the church stand over my tomb." Halldor rebuked the housemaid, went to Norway for timber and built over the tomb of the fastidious Adolf a church which doubtless owed to the miracles of the enshrined saint much of its success in the propagation of the religion Halldor's great-grandfather had brought from the West.⁷⁷ Another source of Christian influence was found in the Christian colonists from the British Isles. Evidence of Irish settlement in Iceland, long before Norwegians drifted there, was found in memorials in the shape of "Irish books, bells, croziers, and many other things."⁷⁸ A typical settler of later time was Ketil the Simpleton, whose saintliness was manifested by amazing miracles. His homestead acquired such sanctity that after his decease, if a Pagan attempted to settle there, his sacrilege was divinely punished by instant death.⁷⁹

⁷⁶ *Saga of King Olaf Tryggwason*, N. L., I, p. 170.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 165, 173.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 158.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 171.

It is interesting to find as a fertile source of Christian influence in the Northlands the legend of an Irish saint. "The Mass-day of God's maiden Sunnifa and her blessed company is observed," we read, "by Northmen on the 8th of the month July, which day we call the Saints'-day of [the island] Selia. In Selia our Lord Jesus Christ performs many notable miracles on account of the merits of those His saints who are forever glorified there."⁸⁰ This St. Sunnifa is no other than an exceptional Irish princess who was neither married nor deserted by her Viking lover, but who turned a deaf ear to his protestations. "I intend," she said, "no longer, like a bondwoman, to bear the labour and anxiety of this unhappy kingdom . . . but rather, like a woman of high birth, will I assert my freedom, and place myself in the hands and under the protection of Jesus Christ my Lord." Her story has traits of that of Chaucer's Constance. Accompanied by a loving, eager multitude, she seeks the seashore and puts off with companions in a sailless, oarless, rudderless boat. Drifting up to the island of Selia, off Norway, she and her followers live in large caves in the sides of a mountain. Enemies threaten them from the mainland, and, praying to God that He will save their souls in Heaven and their bodies from mutilation, they retire to their caves and are hidden from their eager foes by miraculously falling boulders which block the cave entrances.⁸¹ The remainder of the story contains all the stock-traits of the post-mortem influence of a Christian saint. But it is told with a freshness and charm that places it apart from the hackneyed tales with which I am familiar in Western literature. The very breath of the Northern ocean blows through the description of the two yeomen coasting along from the Firths northwards towards Throntham; and the charm of Iona itself gleaming out of a blue-gray sea seems to characterize this northern island, also, as we gaze with these yeomen at the "beautiful bright beam of light which shone from heaven on the sea, and enfolded the neighboring . . . [Selia] in its brightness."⁸² I have never seen the often-borrowed motive of the severed singing head of Orpheus floating up into the hands of fishermen handled more powerfully than in the passage where

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 156.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 152-153.

⁸² *Ibid.*, p. 154.

the yeomen, going up from the shore, are dramatically introduced to the holy marvels of the island by finding "just where they had seen the light fall, a human head, bright and lovely, which gave forth a sweet odour, the like of which they had never before perceived."⁸³ The description of the exploration of the island furnishes the sort of stimulating motive, somewhat deepened and subtilized, that characterizes an incident of secular adventure. ". . . . and when they came to the crags in the west of the island, they found that large caves had existed there which had been blocked by falling stones not many years before. Everywhere among the stones they discovered human bones having a most delightful odour; and at length coming to a spot where the rock had lately broken away from the mouth of a cave, they found the body of the holy maiden Sunnifa, perfect and uninjured; the hair and flesh appearing as if she had only just breathed her last."⁸⁴ Our interest in St. Sunnifa is increased by the fact that Norse saga calls her the sister of the famous Irish St. Alban, who, according to Bede, died the first martyr's death in the British Isles under the persecution of Diocletian.⁸⁵ The writer tells us that he was thought by some to be of Sunnifa's company on the island of Selia.⁸⁶ At any rate, his name was one that the Norsemen conjured by. For we read that a large church consecrated to him rose in Selia, and his head was worshipped there with great veneration.⁸⁷

To summarize briefly: In the treatment of the British Isles in Norse saga, we find, of course, reflection of actual historical conditions, but reflections modified constantly by the romantic imagination of the saga-writers. The grim realities of conquest are mellowed and humanized by inclusion in the treatment of them, of poignant motives of family feud and reconciliation. The voyages of pillage and plunder are also voyages of picturesque love-adventure. The monotonous marriages of princes and chiefs are vivified forever by the exquisite story of Gyda and Olaf. From the western islands to the North come in due time not only young princes returning from their years of foreign training, but also strange and gallant boys claiming their birthrights, who, in their

⁸³ *Ibid.*, p. 154.

⁸⁴ *Saga of King Olaf Tryggwason*, N. L., I, p. 155.

⁸⁵ *Bede, the Venerable: Venerabilis Bædæ Historiam Ecclesiasticam Gentis Anglorum instruxit*, Carolus Plummer, Ch. 7, Oxford, 1896.

⁸⁶ *Saga of King Olaf Tryggwason*, N. L., p. 155.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*

sudden appearance, naïve manners and fearless demeanor oddly resemble the uncanny, precocious striplings of Celtic legend reared through childhood in the forest by deserted fairy-mothers. Over other figures, also, is thrown the glamor of romance. The sailor Faxi, aboard Floki's Viking-ship, points out with his ominous ravens the course to Iceland. The soldiers sent by King John outberserker, as we have seen, the soldiers of Odin. Above all, in these stories, are the figures through which Christianity makes its way into Scandinavia,—colonist, missionary, saint,—wrapped in a luminous haze of miraculous legend. In these pages we can, indeed, discern the well-known historical motives. England with her surrounding islands is at once a refuge and a menace, a plunder-goal and a trade-centre, an object of conquest and a friendly proselyter. But over all these practical aspects plays the brooding, passionate imagination of the North, enhancing motive and infusing charm, till at times we catch a glimpse of these islands as they must have seemed to many a high-hearted young rover or dreamer of the northern Middle Ages,—his Ultima Thule of wonder and delight.

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